

the use of American trade names for drugs means that one example outlined is not understandable to a wider readership. Those with some knowledge of the field will find some points of interest in Dr Dyer's exploration of the underlying theme. It is not a suitable book on its own as an introduction to ethics for trainee psychiatrists.

The book is published only in hardback at £35 and is worthwhile for a library purchase.

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## Biomedicine Examined

Edited by Margaret Lock and Deborah Gordon, 558 pages, Dordrecht, £56.00, hbk, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988

In the last decade biomedicine has attracted a good deal of critical attention, not least because of its cost implications. Commentators have become reluctant to accept on trust claims made in its name. This is partly a function of the growing realisation that biomedical knowledge and practices are social accomplishments, rather than 'natural' or 'given' phenomena, and as such open to analysis and critique. As one of the editors of *Biomedicine Examined*, Deborah Gordon, puts it: 'We may increasingly speak of a social scientific/historic gaze turned on medicine, describing hidden cultural scaffolding and social processes that shape practice and knowledge' (page 20).

In this volume the editors have put together a collection of papers from anthropologists, sociologists and physicians on the interdependence of biomedicine, society and culture. More specifically, the emphasis is on a largely ethnographic approach to 'the meanings and values implicit in biomedical knowledge and practice'. Margaret Lock and Deborah Gordon have done their job admirably, and the eighteen varied and challenging papers assembled will constitute a rich resource for health academics and practitioners.

The papers cover aspects of the reproduction of medical knowledge, changes and recent extensions in the jurisdiction of physicians, the 'routinisation' of medical technology,

the relevance of social and cultural context to biomedical practice, and modes of legitimization of biomedicine. They are of a uniformly high standard and there should be something in this volume for everyone with a critical interest in issues of health and health care. Perhaps one theme, which recurs in a number of papers, will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. This is the notion that the consolidation of biomedicine in Western health care has led to a situation in which its practitioners, claiming expertise through science, have come to proffer scientific solutions to problems which are essentially moral or political, and hence the province of us all.

It would be invidious to pick out papers for special mention here for two reasons: first, the overall quality of this 'large' and heterogeneous collection is high; and second, what individual readers find useful and helpful will be contingent on their own theoretical and practical interests. I have no hesitation, however, in recommending this impressive text to all those with a genuine concern for the future of 'healing'.

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## The Genetics of Mental Retardation

Edited by E K Hicks and J M Berg, 207 pages, Dordrecht, \$69.00, hbk, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988

This book comprises the papers and brief discussion summaries of an international workshop which convened in 1986. The title is somewhat misleading. The book is divided into three sections: Prenatal Diagnosis, Postnatal diagnosis and Genetic counselling. Each section is a combination of purely scientific or medical accounts, such as the chromosomal findings in first trimester chorionic villus biopsy, and the use of the computer in the diagnosis of dysmorphic syndromes, and papers on moral and psychosocial aspects: for example, ethical questions in the prenatal chromosomal diagnosis of mental retardation and psychosocial developments in the field of genetic

counselling. Each paper is of high quality, as would be expected from the distinguished body of contributors. There are particular gems from R W Smithells, reflecting sensitively on the management of both child and parents when handicap is diagnosed immediately after birth, and from G R Dunstan on ethical issues in the field of choice in treating the severely handicapped newborn child, drawing out that the final arbiter in management is the physician as the 'authorised moral agent'. J C Fletcher explores how ethical issues evolve in different societies in the practice of prenatal diagnosis, using data derived from his multi-nation, multi-culture survey of medical geneticists.

Prenatal diagnosis and genetic counselling have long been topics of ethical discussion, and much has been written on the subject. This was why it was a disappointment in a way to open a book entitled *The Genetics of Mental Retardation* and find it was, in fact, this well-worked field. Further, Genetics is a rapidly advancing subject, and today *in vitro* fertilisation and genetic manipulation of embryos have superseded, although not eliminated, prenatal diagnosis and genetic counselling as prime areas of moral concern at the beginning of life, while still leading to discussions on the sanctity and quality of life. Yet they are scarcely mentioned. Nevertheless, this is a useful and authoritative collection of papers which are a pleasure to read.

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## Manuale di Bioetica (2nd Edition)

Elio Sgreccia, 542 pages, Milan, L 44,000, Vita e Pensiero, 1988 (Published in Italian)

Bioethics as a discipline has become more and more topical and interesting in the last few years, because of new problems, and today it is at a significant turning point. It has now passed from the universities to political and parliamentary sessions, although actually this is more a return to the political environment. We know, in fact, that bioethics was born partly as a result of the Nuremberg trial, which brought to light the terrible crimes of